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Melodramatic Histrionics

Bernhard Anselm Weber, 'Ich bin geliebt' (Sulmalle), *Sulmalle* 1802

Katherine Hambridge

We are supposed to be impressed by quality, not quantity, or so the axiom goes. But sometimes sheer quantity can be impressive, remarkable, even revealing. Casually looking at a manuscript in the Berlin Staatsbibliothek, for example, I eventually realised I was leafing for page after page through a single aria, in which *fortissimos*, tempo changes, key changes, horn signals, trumpet and timpani entrances accumulated over the course of 271 bars to a conspicuous excess.

The aria in question hails from Berlin Kapellmeister Bernhard Anselm Weber's *Sulmalle* (Berlin, 1802), described as both a 'lyrisches Duodrama mit Chören' (1802 libretto) and a 'lyrisches Melodrama' (1810 manuscript score).¹ While a sung rather than spoken melodrama was unusual, the work's Ossianic subject was certainly *à la mode*. Carl Herklots's libretto focusses on Sulmalle's love for Kathmor, an Irish warrior who had promised to marry her after defeating an enemy in battle. Sulmalle's

¹ The digitised manuscript score can be accessed here: http://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht/?PPN=PPN781340225&DMDID=DMDLOG_0011; the libretto is available here: <http://bildsuche.digitale-sammlungen.de/index.html?c=viewer&bandnummer=bsb00054339&pimage=00001&v=100&nav=&l=en>. We have records of four performances at the Nationaltheater in 1802, and one each in 1803, 1813, 1815 and 1816; the piece's absence between 1803 and 1813 was apparently due to the lack of a suitable singer. See *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* (10 November 1813), 740.

arrival at the agreed rendezvous – the cave of the druid Klonmal – is the event that starts the melodrama. What ensues is somewhat short of incident, as a string of Berlin reviewers noted: *Sulmalle* followed Georg Benda's melodramas *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *Medea* in prioritising the portrayal of one woman's extremes of feeling over action.² Sulmalle tells her story to Klonmal in a series of arias and recitatives that flicker constantly between hope and fear, past and present, imaginary and real, while the sounds of Kathmor's battle (military rhythms, timpani and brass) repeatedly intrude upon her narration.

The aria in question, 'Ich bin geliebt', comes just after Sulmalle relates her lover's recent offer of marriage: the opening line refers both to her past joy and her present – precarious – state. Over the course of forty-six lines of verse (and those 271 bars) Sulmalle's desperate confidence in Kathmor's survival turns to fear – and eventually to a vision of the (by now) dead Kathmor's ghost, rising to the heavens amid thunderclaps. After the aria, Sulmalle falls on a dagger, ecstatically extolling their eternal union, and the druids round things off by singing how the lovers 'died gloriously'.³

With hindsight, it is clear that 'Ich bin geliebt' marks both the high-point of Sulmalle's joy and the crisis that prompts her emotional disintegration: extreme points

² In this context, Jacqueline Waeber links melodrama's emergence in the 1770s to a 'sensitivity of excess', and in a German context, to the Sturm und Drang fashion for 'lieux terrible, femmes perdues'; see Waeber, *En Musique dans le texte. Le melodrame de Rousseau à Schoenberg* (Paris, 2005), 40, 51-104.

³ This comes from reviews: neither the score nor the libretto indicates how Sulmalle dies.

within a plot in which she is constantly *in extremis*. This extremity seems to have prompted a highly unusual aria form. Herklot's text is already one exceedingly long continuous verse form; Weber, meanwhile, structured the emotional trajectory with four sections divided by double lines and key changes, charting a progression from C major to C minor (see Table 1).

Table 1: formal outline of 'Ich bin geliebt'

Bars 1-101	Bars 102-135	Bars 136-215	Bars 216- 271
'Ich bin geliebt'	'Schon herrscht die Stille'	'Sein fernes Kommen'	'Ach! Ohne Leben'
C major	A flat major	E flat major	C minor
2/2	$\frac{3}{4}$	$\frac{3}{4}$	
sonata-like form	through-composed	through-composed	through-composed

The combination of sectionalisation, through-composition and major-minor shift exhibited here seem to derive from a self-conscious mixing of genres by Weber and Herklots; specifically, from the melodramatic principles operating in this aria. 'Melodrama' typically referred to a genre in which spoken prose was declaimed between (and occasionally above) short phrases of orchestral music (often tonally unresolved).⁴ Applying the logic of *recitativo obbligato*, the music was constructed by 'accumulation rather than integration'; the extended monologues might contain some

⁴ Waeber, *En Musique*, 31-9.

reminiscence and repetition, but were essentially through-composed in order to convey a constant stream of varying emotions.⁵

In this context, *Sulmalle* as a whole represents one of many attempts at this time to address some of the long-standing criticisms of melodrama: the monotony of prolonged melodramatic technique; the perceived limitation of music's expressive potential by melodrama's stop-start structure; and – successfully or not – the lack of action. Other reformers chose to expand the cast and narrative, or to introduce uninterrupted spoken dialogue and song alongside melodramatic monologues. In *Sulmalle*, as in their earlier 'lyrisches melodrama', *Hero* (1800), Weber and Herklots avoided the small-scale alternation of music and spoken text simply by setting the entire libretto to be sung.⁶ Their adaptation of melodrama therefore included 'operatic' conventions such as the alternation of recitative and aria, marked in both libretto and score; lyric verse rather than the free prose more characteristic of melodramas; recapitulating aria structures; and Weber's sentential melodic construction. Indeed, the generic mix in *Sulmalle* was recognised by critics at the time, who tended to position the work between opera and cantata because of the continuing lack of action.⁷

In its experimental nature, 'Ich bin geliebt' thus offers an insight into the influence of melodrama on lyric genres, particularly with regard to through-

⁵ Ibid., 54.

⁶ *Allgemeine Theaterzeitung* (November 1800), 322.

⁷ E. T. A. Hoffmann, 'Sulmalle', *Dramaturgisches Wochenblatt* (14 October 1815), 114-15; *Annalen des Nationaltheaters* (27 February 1802), 141-143; *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* (15 June 1802), 623; *Vossische Zeitung* (17 March 1803).

composition in both opera and the Lied (even if through-composition is observable on occasion in both of those genres before Weber's 'sung melodramas'). But might this aria also offer us something more far-reaching; something embodied not through its form but through its sheer length? Such lengthiness was by no means an obvious outcome of the cross-fertilisation of opera and melodrama, given the operatic features that Weber and Herklots retained. Why was this stretch of Sulmalle's narrative envisaged as one long aria, for example, rather than itself a mix of aria and recitative? Sulmalle moves through a number of emotions, does not end up in the same state as she started, and sees the vision of Kathmor's ghost in the third section: the text of the aria seems unsuited for treatment in the static mode of 'aria-time'.

Once again, we might understand this excess in the light of contemporary melodramatic practice, where the accumulation of ideas typically occurs from start to finish, in a kind of real-time; the melodrama is long but barely sectionalised, let alone divided into numbers. But in melodrama, the continuous music and through-composition tended to result in part from a commitment to realism: a commitment not to circumscribe emotional expression by formal conventions, whether textual or musical. In Sulmalle's aria, by contrast, this accumulation is set within the rest of the libretto's operatic aria-recitative division, and within this economy, perpetuates the heightened register of aria-time to a disproportionate extent. Such extended lyric through-composition in opera would become common only much later in the century, after the aria-recitative division has dissolved. The paradox – and maybe the paradoxical power – of 'Ich bin geliebt' lies thus in its formal freedom within formal constraints, its expansion within limits. Because *Sulmalle* is clearly divided into numbers, the temporal excess of this individual aria is all the more conspicuous.

Perhaps, in fact, ‘Ich bin geliebt’ suggests a commitment to length itself. That is to say, the length is not – or not only – a by-product of realism and the dissolution of dramatic units, but implies a belief in the emotional power of lyric accumulation as an effect. And this brings us back to quantity. Not in terms of the monumentality identified by Alexander Rehding in nineteenth-century orchestral works, in which the dramatic proportions of forces and music reflect a historic intention, a representation of power and immortality, a ‘superhuman quality, which implicitly minimizes the individual and the everyday’.⁸ Nor as a musical version of Kant’s mathematical sublime, later interpreted by Michaelis as resulting from sounds appearing ‘at great length, or with complete uniformity, or with frequent interruptions, or with shattering intensity, or where the part-writing is very complex, so that the listener’s imagination is severely taxed in an effort to grasp the whole’: Michaelis’s sublime, like Kant’s, elevates the imagination to ‘the plane of the limitless, the immeasurable, the unconquerable’.⁹ Sulmalle, by contrast, is beside herself, not elevated above herself and human things; it is the portrayal of an all-too-human, all-too-individual state.

Insofar as this aria’s length and emotional excess exemplifies any larger tendency at all, it might display what both David Charlton and Emilio Sala have called ‘histrionic proportions’, with Charlton identifying a ‘melodrama model’ in

⁸ Alexander Rehding, *Music and Monumentality: Commemoration and Wonderment in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (New York, 2009), 28.

⁹ Christian Friedrich Michaelis, ‘Einige Bemerkungen über das Erhabene der Musik’, *Berlinische musikalische Zeitung* 1/46 (1805), 179; translated in Peter Le Huray and James Day, eds., *Music and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, abridged edn (Cambridge, 1988), 203.

French operas of the 1780s and 1790s, and Sala referring more generally to melodrama's influence on the 'evolution' of the nineteenth-century *aria di scena*.¹⁰ In other words, maybe we should take the 'excess' or 'overstatement' widely attributed to the melodramatic tradition more literally, and be alive to such qualities (and quantities) in considering the expansion of musical forms on the stage.¹¹

And if it seems suggestive for us to categorise length as an expressive statement rather than simple prolixity, the evidence of the critics similarly suggests that the aria struck them as both impressive and remarkable. 'Ich bin geliebt' was singled out in almost every review for its force, its appeal to the audience, and – on one occasion – its innovative form. Perhaps, then, this aria can remind us of the potential power of musical processes of accumulation over the more familiar qualities of integration. Without formal conventions (delayed or expanded), and without thematic development, extreme length can be productive of its own intensity, and through its

¹⁰ David Charlton, 'Storms, Sacrifices: The "Melodrama Model" in Opera', in *French Opera 1730-1830: Meaning and Media* (Aldershot, 2000), 1-61; Emilio Sala, *L'opera senza canto: il mélo romantico e l'invenzione della colonna sonora*, (Venice, 1995), 50.

¹¹ Waeber also speaks of melodrama's 'excès de sens' in terms of its tautological employment of text and music: *En musique*, 39-40; Peter Brooks sees melodrama as a 'mode of the bigger-than-life' through its 'heightened dramatization', where overlapping media (text, music, gesture, scenery) overstate and overemphasise the character's deepest feelings. See Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, rev. edn (New Haven, 1995), esp. xiii, 36, and 54.

unpredictability, of its own momentum – precisely because the ‘listener’s imagination is severely taxed in an effort to grasp the whole’. Sulmalle’s 271 bars of histrionics, unfolded across sixty-one pages of spidery handwritten score, could therefore make us reconsider the aesthetic implications – and impact - of *mere* excess.